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'Will not be heard of again': a proposal to combine the resources of the National Library and Trinity College Library¹

Brendan Grimes

A PROPOSAL to combine the resources of the National Library of Ireland and Trinity College Library Dublin was given serious consideration by the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, in 1960 but finally rejected on the advice of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. It is the fate of libraries to grow and eventually outgrow their allotted space and both libraries needed more space urgently. To add to its space problems the National Library suffered the loss of some of its accommodation in 1922 when the newly formed Irish state took over Leinster House. Trinity College had already decided to build a new library on its campus, and was busy appealing for funds when the proposal was made. The Director of the National Library, Dr Richard Hayes² had been frustrated in his effort to build a new national library.

Dr Hayes' efforts date back to at least May 1944 when he sent a memorandum to the Secretary of the Department of the Taoiseach on the collecting of Irish records. He pointed out the urgency of this work due to the hazards of war, neglect, and ignorance. In the memorandum he stated that the National Library needed a new building on a new site immediately.³ Dr Hayes must have received encouragement from the Government and in January 1946 he submitted a sketch design of the new library, prepared by himself.⁴ By August 1946 the Minister of Finance had agreed that steps should be taken to acquire a site for the library. Dr Hayes suggested two possible sites in Dublin city: one was the army barracks at Beggars' Bush (on the corner of Shelbourne Road and Haddington Road), the other was owned by the Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis club at Wilton Terrace. It was proposed that the new library building was to have been used by the National Museum as it also needed additional space. In July 1947 the Government approved in principle the erection of a new library on the Wilton Terrace site. If no agreement to acquire the site could be made with the owners, then legislation was to be enacted to allow it to be acquired by compulsion.⁵ The owners did protest and were granted a meeting with the Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, who told them that the Government still intended to acquire the site but were willing to assist the club in an informal way to secure a suitable site.⁶ Less than a month after this meeting, a general election was held on 4 February 1948, and de Valera was unable to form a new government. The new Government, led by John A. Costello, decided, as an economic measure, not to proceed with the new national library. No progress was made by the next de Valera Government of 1951-4, and Trinity College, which was unlikely to be preferred over the National Library, had also approached the Government for help to build a new library, without success.

In 1959 the idea to combine the resources of their libraries came out of discussions between the Provost of Trinity College, Dr A.J. McConnell, and the director of the National Library, Dr Richard Hayes. It was imperative that the proposal be put to the Government straight away because Trinity College was working to secure funds for

its new library and the brief for the international architectural competition was been written. The outline of the proposal was that the Government was to rent the area between the Fellows' Garden and College Park and to build on this site a block to contain the National Library and the extension to Trinity library. The two libraries would be separated by a party wall and their contents would be distinct. When the libraries became full additional space would not be expected from Trinity College, instead an external book store would be used. Dr Hayes argued that the advantages of the proposal would be that the research material freely available to the public would be doubled; the site was an ideal one for the National Library; it would be economical because there would be no further need to duplicate resources; on the political level it would provide a striking example of cultural co-operation to Northern Ireland; Trinity's bibliographical sources would become freely available, and all the technological and industrial publications of the UK would become available at no cost. The last point was probably calculated to appeal to the Taoiseach, Seán Lemass and was elaborated thus in Dr Hayes' memorandum:

As there is no municipal technical and commercial library or information service available in Ireland to the industrial and commercial community such as is now common practice in the large cities of more developed countries and in view of the urgent need for industrial expansion, the two libraries should unite to provide such a service under joint control, Trinity College Library providing the material and the National Library the staff.

Dr Hayes met Seán Lemass on 25 February 1959 to explain the proposals and a few days later he sent him the memorandum entitled 'Proposed Heads of Agreement between the Government of Ireland and Trinity College'.⁷ Lemass consulted his Secretary and the Ministers of Finance and Education and was advised that the chances of securing agreement from either University College Dublin or the Catholic hierarchy (both of which would have considered themselves concerned with the matter) was so remote that it was not worthwhile giving the matter further consideration.⁸ Lemass seems to have been keen on the idea and he persuaded himself or was persuaded to allow his civil servants to give it serious thought. The Taoiseach's Secretary, Muiris Ó Muimhneacháin wrote to the Secretary of the Department of Education, Tarlach Ó Raifeartaigh on 18 March 1959 asking him to give his opinion on Dr Hayes' proposals '...other than any religious or political aspects.' By this stage Lemass had been thinking of discussing the proposal with Dr John Charles McQuaid, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin before giving Trinity College an indication whether the proposal would be favourably considered or not. Dr McConnell had, a few days previously, written a memorandum to the Taoiseach expressing approval of Dr Hayes' plan and saying that 'We in Trinity College believe that Dr Hayes' proposal is one of national importance, and we feel that the Government should give it very serious consideration before rejecting it.'⁹ Dr McConnell may have been a little sceptical of the proposal's chances of becoming a reality and he did not want to hold up the architectural competition, however if the Government could say 'maybe' he would get the assessors to meet again. Ó Raifeartaigh, after studying the proposal came to the conclusion that '...if all extrinsic aspects of the matter could be excluded, the advantages of the scheme would appear to be very much greater than its possible drawbacks.'¹⁰ In anticipation of the expected difficulties the Government had to take

account of the Roman Catholic hierarchy's traditional hostility to Trinity College. Trinity College was not considered by the hierarchy as a suitable university for the education of Catholics; the National University of Ireland was founded in the 19th century to provide an alternative university, as a response to Roman Catholic hierarchy lobbying. From 1944 McQuaid forbade Catholics from his archdiocese from attending Trinity and from 1960 he was the final arbiter on whether Catholics from anywhere in Ireland could attend Trinity.¹¹

To make the memorandum suitable for Dr McQuaid's eyes it was subjected to careful scrutiny by the civil servants and many small word changes were made (with Dr Hayes' approval and help). The title was not overlooked and it was changed to 'Memorandum on the Problem of providing space for the growth of the National Library.' Just before it was sent one final change was made on the instruction of Lemass: 'for the erection on a site between the Fellows' Garden...' was changed to 'for the surrender to the State of a site...' On 31 March 1959 Lemass sent a copy of the memorandum to Dr Charles McQuaid, asking him for '...the benefit of Your Grace's advice.'¹² Dr McQuaid replied at once asking for some time to examine the proposal. Lemass hoped for an early reply and wrote at once to Dr McQuaid pointing out that the Dáil would shortly be in recess for two weeks and asking would it be convenient to see him in this period. No reply was made to this letter and after waiting for three weeks the army dispatch rider who delivered the letter was interviewed to confirm that he had delivered the letter. The Archbishop's silence caused a flurry of anxiety in the Department of the Taoiseach as Lemass wanted to report to Dr McConnell as soon as he could but he could do nothing until the Archbishop was ready to give his advice. The last thing Ó Muimhneacháin wanted to do was to write again to the Archbishop or to telephone (heaven forbid) Archbishop's House. In a handwritten note, marked very urgent, to Ó Raifeartaigh he wrote 'I should be glad if you would check further at our end - that is, without [double underlined] making any enquiry at Archbishop's House - that the letter addressed to His Grace on the 2nd instant was duly delivered.'¹³ On the same day the sergeant in charge of dispatch riders was interviewed and his records checked. The dispatch rider was interviewed again and he said that he distinctly remembered handing the letter to a priest, or a student in clerical garb, on the day in question. Lemass could wait no longer and a carefully worded letter was sent to the Archbishop suggesting that '...there may be some clarification or additional information that you would require in advance of our proposed discussion of this matter.'¹⁴ McQuaid wrote back right away to say that he would like to discuss the proposal and that he was free the next day if that would suit the Taoiseach.¹⁵ It is unlikely that Lemass had free time at such short notice, however he went to Archbishop's House to hear Dr McQuaid's views. Dr McQuaid was anxious that the Government would not implement the proposal and he went to considerable trouble to prepare his arguments against it. He thought that it would result in an increased status for Trinity College as a cultural centre and he was against it because it was a non-Catholic institution. It is probable that the Taoiseach and Dr McQuaid met alone and each man wrote a memorandum of the meeting. McQuaid's account of the meeting is written by hand as follows:

The Taoiseach called 12 noon, 4th May, 1960. He spent an hour.

I explained the undesirable result of practically making Trinity the centre of culture and research by the proposed conjunction of T.C.D. and the National

Library.

I emphasised the action of the Bishops in countering the T.C.D. Library campaign in U.S.A.

I said that I had been so anxious about the implications that I had spoken to the Bishops at our recent meeting. Unanimously they disliked the project.

I asked him not to pursue it.

At once, the Taoiseach said: "That is the end of the project." He added that T.C.D. had not originated the scheme. He himself did not like it. He would prefer a Library for serious students, with Nat. Library on outskirts of City. I explained need for a Research Library with arrangements for coordinated purchase and loan of foreign and scientific works.

The Taoiseach then spoke of our industrial development and of entry of foreign manufacturers consequent on recent Trade pact with Gr. Britain.¹⁶

Lemass recorded the outcome of the meeting as follows:

I discussed with his Grace, Dr. McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin, the proposal contained in the Memorandum which I had sent to him for an association between the National Library and Dublin University Library. His Grace told me that he had discussed the proposal with the Bishops and that they were unanimous in requesting the Government not to proceed on the lines suggested. In the course of the subsequent discussion His Grace gave me to understand that the main reason for this request was the undesirability, from the viewpoint of the Hierarchy, of suggesting by such an arrangement, involving the National Library, that Dublin University was regarded by the Government as the most important centre of higher education in the State.¹⁷

Lemass's only preparation for the meeting was the arguments contained in the Hayes memorandum and he was no match for McQuaid who was both well-prepared and passionately anxious that the scheme should not proceed. If the subject matter had been industrial development Lemass would have been well able for McQuaid, but on the library proposal he was unwilling to risk conflict with the hierarchy. In this case the hierarchy's wish was as good as law as far as the Government was concerned, and the Government was unlikely to forget the strong influence the hierarchy had over most of the people, who were the electorate. The end of the matter was recorded in a short memorandum, written by Ó Muimhneacháin thus: 'In view of the attitude of the Catholic Hierarchy, as conveyed to him by the Archbishop of Dublin, the Taoiseach has decided that Dr Hayes' suggestions concerning the National Library and Trinity College should not be adopted.'¹⁸ On the day of the meeting McQuaid wrote to Cardinal D'Alton, with the brevity of one in complete control, that he was '...glad to report that to-day I saw the Taoiseach and that the proposal to conjoin T.C.D. and the National Library will not be heard of again.'¹⁹

Mr Lemass met Dr McConnell on 10 May 1960 to inform him of the Catholic hierarchy's advice and the Government's decision. The decision must have cleared the air and allowed Lemass to consider less controversial ways to help the college. At the meeting Lemass was told that the college had raised £200,000 for the extension and that another £250,000 was needed. Lemass said he would discuss with the Minister of Finance the possibilities of a state grant for the scheme.²⁰ A grant was

sanctioned in October 1961, and in October 1963 the Government undertook to meet half the originally estimated cost of £640,000 and to meet interest and sinking fund charges in excess of that amount on the understanding that the total cost would not exceed £800,000.²¹ In return for the grant the college was to make its library more accessible to the public and to agree to co-ordinate its acquisition programme with the National Library.²² The Government's decision to make the grant drew criticism from Dr Michael Tierney, president of University College Dublin. He told a meeting of the Social Study Congress, organised by the Dublin Institute of Catholic Sociology that the large grants given to a Protestant university which pretended to be suitable for Catholics could not be justified. He accused the Government of being under the influence of the Wolfe Tone cult in giving such large subsidies. The papal nuncio, Dr Sensi, and Dr McQuaid were in the audience.²³

Trinity College has recently been constructing a new library building, the James Ussher Library, on the site which had been proposed for the National Library in 1960. The National Library still occupies its original building in Kildare Street, owns 4-5 Kildare Street, and has acquired 2-3 Kildare Street (formerly the Kildare Street Club) where its manuscript department is housed. It has also acquired the main part of the Leinster Lane premises of the National College of Art and Design. A major building programme to provide new storage, adapt newly acquired premises, and refurbish the original library is in train.²⁴

Notes

1. This episode was first noticed by me when researching in the National Archives for my piece 'The Library Buildings up to 1970' in Vincent Kinane and Anne Walsh (eds), *Essays on the history of Trinity College Library*, Dublin 2000. Since then I have noted John Bowman, "The wolf in Sheep's Clothing": Richard Hayes's Proposal for a new National Library of Ireland, 1959-60', in Ronald J. Hill and Michael Marsh (eds) *Modern Irish democracy*, Dublin 1993, p.44-61.
2. Richard Hayes was director of the National Library from 1940 to 1967.
3. National Archives, Dublin, memorandum from R.J. Hayes to Secretary of Department of the Taoiseach, May 1944, S13795A.
4. *Ibid.*, 11 January 1946.
5. *Ibid.*, memorandum, 8 July 1947.
6. *Ibid.*, memorandum of a meeting of the Taoiseach and a deputation from Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis club, 14 January 1947.
7. National Archives, Dublin, 'Proposed Heads of Agreement between the Government of Ireland and Trinity College, Dublin', [February 1959], S13795 B/61.
8. *Ibid.*, memorandum from Secretary of Department of the Taoiseach to the Taoiseach, 17 August 1959, S13795 B/61.
9. *Ibid.*, memorandum from A.J. McConnell to the Taoiseach, 11 March 1960.
10. *Ibid.*, T. Ó Raifeartaigh to M. Ó Muimhneacháin, 21 March 1960.
11. John Bowman, "The wolf in Sheep's Clothing": Richard Hayes's Proposal for a new National Library of Ireland, 1959-60', in Ronald J. Hill & Michael Marsh (eds) *Modern Irish democracy*, Dublin 1993, p.51.
12. National Archives, Dublin, Seán Lemass to Charles McQuaid, 31 March 1960, S13795 B/61.
13. *Ibid.*, M. Ó Muimhneacháin to T. Ó Raifeartaigh, 28 April 1960.
14. *Ibid.*, Seán Lemass to Charles McQuaid, 2 May 1960.
15. *Ibid.*, Charles McQuaid to Seán Lemass 3 May 1960.
16. Dublin Diocesan Archives, memorandum, 4 May 1960, TCD/NLI merger pro-

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- posal.
- 17.National Archives, Dublin, memorandum, Department of the Taoiseach, 4 May 1960, S13795 B/61.
- 18.Ibid., memorandum, Department of the Taoiseach, 5 May 1960.
- 19.Dublin Diocesan Archives, Charles McQuaid to John Cardinal D'Alton, 4 May 1960, TCD/NLI merger proposal.
- 20.National Archives, Dublin, memorandum 10 May 1960, S13795 B/61.
- 21.National Archives, Dublin, memorandum 9 October 1963, S13962C/63.
- 22.J.V.Luce, *Trinity College Dublin: the first 400 years*, Dublin 1992, p.166.
- 23.*Irish Times*, 29 June 1964.
- 24.Gerard Long, 'The National Library of Ireland', in Neil Buttimer, Colin Rynne, and Helen Guerin (eds), *The heritage of Ireland*, Cork 2000, p. 311.

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